

NICHOLAS SUN-KEUNG PANG & TING WANG

INSTITUTIONS' ESPOUSED VALUES PERCEIVED BY CHINESE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Abstract

This paper presents some key findings of a quantitative study which assessed a group of Chinese educational leaders' value orientations. A survey instrument "The Institutional Values Inventory" was used to investigate their perspectives on the values espoused by their institutions in terms of traditional Confucian ethics and values of hierarchical relationship, collectivism, humanism, and self-cultivation. It discusses implications for leadership preparation and practice in an increasingly globalized context.

Keywords: Value orientation, Confucianism, educational leadership, China

Chinese culture and leadership

The concept of culture has become increasingly important in the discourse of educational leadership and management. Many writers have argued for a comparative cross-cultural perspective where the influence of societal culture upon educational leadership is researched and compared across societies and cultures (Lee & Pang, 2011). Wider exposure to non-Western knowledge and practices can add richness to our understanding base through exposing alternative ways of thinking and working. Researchers suggest that a culturally and contextually sensitive approach to the study of educational leadership is needed (Begley, 2000; Chapman, 2000; Cheong, 2000; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Ribbins & Gronn, 2000; Stott & Low, 2000; Walker & Dimmock, 2002).

Chinese culture, like other great cultures of the world, is rich in history and content. Huang (1988) argued that Chinese culture and values have been quite consistent over the long years despite the change of time. Many scholars (e.g. Chen, 1995; Cragg, 1995; Seagrave, 1995; Wong, 2001) suggest that there are certain historical-social influences on the development of management and leadership practice in China, such as Confucianism, Taoism and the strategic thinking of Sun Tzu. Confucianism became a structure of ethical precepts for the management of society based upon the achievement of *social harmony* and *social order* within a hierarchically arranged society. The Chinese cultural, historical and social contexts have great impacts upon leadership traditions in China. Respect for hierarchy, maintaining harmony, conflict avoidance, collectivism, face, social networks, moral leadership, and conformity are the key values that have affected leadership traditions in China.

Bush and Qiang (2000) have argued that the diversity and complexity of culture is reflected in the following aspects in the Chinese education system. Contemporary Chinese culture is a mixture of traditional, socialist, enterprise, and patriarchal cultures. Consequently, leadership traditions and conceptions have been influenced by different elements of culture and forces. Leadership is regarded as a culturally complex and a context dependent concept. These four major elements of

contemporary Chinese culture continue to shape educational leadership, which is overwhelmingly male, with a balance between hierarchy and collectivism. Although the emergence of enterprise culture and market socialism seems to be slowly changing the nature of Chinese contemporary culture and social values, such cultural change is unlikely to be radical and transformational, given the cumulative and enduring nature of the indigenous culture. An incremental cultural change is expected in Chinese education in the long run.

The traditional conceptions of leadership in China are mostly associated with a directive, hierarchical and authoritarian “headship”, together with an emphasis on moral leadership, self-cultivation, and artistry in leading. This review highlights the cumulative and enduring nature of Chinese culture and raises the need to understand contemporary Chinese educational leadership and value orientations in changing contexts. The study explored the value orientations of a group of Chinese educational leaders and examined whether Confucian ethics and values continue to be emphasized in educational leadership and management in the contemporary Chinese context.

Theoretical Framework for Assessing Confucian Values

Confucianism, established more than 2000 years ago in Ancient China, has been a vast, interconnected system of philosophies, rituals, habits and practices that still informs the lives of millions of people today in Chinese societies (Berthrong & Berthrong, 2000). It is a philosophical system of ethics, values and moral precepts to provide the foundation for a stable and orderly society and the guidance for ways of life for most Chinese people (Erdener, 1997). Confucianism has profound influences on all aspects of human life in art, education, morality, religion, family life, science, philosophy, government, management and the economy (Bell, 2008).

Confucianism as a philosophy and ideology is predominantly **humanist, collectivist and hierarchical in nature**. This is conspicuously reflected in its profound interest in human affairs and relations. These moral and political value systems are essential philosophical factors of self-cultivation, family-regulation, social harmony, and political doctrine (Lee, 1997). Confucius in his whole life aimed to teach about the wisdom of the former sages with the goal of reforming society with a humanistic ideology. Confucius's moral principles are largely in two directions: (1) building the ideal life of individuals, and (2) achieving the ideal social orders (Lee, 1997, p. 141). In order to achieve these principles, Confucius conceived benevolence or **humanity** as the major paradigm of goodness.

Confucius also aimed to reform society with an advocacy of **collectivism**. Confucius' collectivism is vividly displayed in its emphasis on collective values and interests rather than individual values and interests. The family as the archetype of the collectivity occupies the core position within Confucian ethics and values. With two thousand years of evolution, the emphases of collectivism in the Chinese culture are far beyond the familial collectivism and have been extended to institutional and national relationships (Ip, 1996).

Confucianism also provokes a fundamental core belief in the **hierarchical ordering** of personal relationships (Erdener, 1997). On a broader scale, there were five basic human relationships as conceived by Confucianism — the mutual relationship of the Five Codes of Ethics or Five Relationships. The five

relationships: emperor-officials; father-son; brother-brother; husband-wife and between friends, with the exception of the last one, all exhibited a strong superordinate-subordinate relationship (Ip, 1996). This acceptance of unequal relationships in society reflects the underlying model of relationships found in the traditional Chinese family between father and son, in business enterprise between employer and employee and in the government between senior and junior officials. All these underscore the fundamental importance of personal relationships in Confucian cultures and societies.

In order to build the ideal life of the individual and achieve the ideal social order, Confucius asserts that education is to make it possible for individuals to live the good life in the community and state. Accordingly, moral cultivation is a core educational goal (Lee, 1997). What follows is presumably the basic teaching of how man should relate himself to the social groupings and society that surround him. Within the Confucian moral edifice, the closest text from which one can obtain a notion of civility of the person presumably is *the Great Learning*. In Confucius' words, those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families; those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives; those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds; those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere (Ip, 1996). That is, achieving the goal of **self-moral cultivation** is the single most fundamental human endeavour of a person's life, and only by achieving this goal will the person be able to regulate the family, govern the state, and rule the world.

It is to envisage that the core traditional values and ethics underpinning Chinese educational leadership are hierarchical relationship, collectivism, humanism, and self-cultivation. These form the theoretical framework for assessing the extent to which these traditional values are espoused by Chinese educational institutions. The meanings of four scales of Confucian ethics and values in the context of Chinese education are briefly delineated as below.

- **Hierarchical relationship** refers to the hierarchical and organizational structures in an institution built to facilitate and enhance the achievement of goals.
- **Collectivism** refers to the strategies in managing an institution that facilitate the development of a collective culture.
- **Humanism** refers to the ways in which administrators adopt to build a reciprocal understanding among people and to enhance respect for employees.
- **Self-cultivation** refers to the value system that leads to the development of individuals' full potentials and their ethical spirits and moral standards.

Research Methodology

Research instrument

A standardized instrument, *The Institutional Values Inventory* (IVI), was developed to assess educational leaders' value orientations in their respective institutions. The development of the original measures was made following an extensive literature review and with a particular focus on administrative values and

ethics within institutions. Eight subscales of institutional values were hypothesized as indicators of Confucian ethics and values of hierarchical relationship, collectivism, humanism, and self-cultivation. The practice of *formality and bureaucratic control* are indicators of Confucian values of hierarchical relationship among people within school organizations; *participation, collaboration and collegiality* are indicators of Confucian values of collectivism; *goals orientation, communication and consensus* are indicators of Confucian values of humanism; and *professional orientation and teacher autonomy* are indicators of Confucian values of self-cultivation.

Participants

The subjects of the study were 67 Chinese educational leaders who enrolled in an Australian transnational leadership programme in Zhejiang Province, China, in the year of 2011. The backgrounds of the participants were diverse in terms of working experience, age, rank and position. Most of them held leading positions in their institutions, including principals and senior teachers in primary and secondary schools, directors and unit heads in the local education systems, professors, lecturers and administrators in the higher education sector.

Data collection

The participants were asked to complete *The Institutional Values Inventory* (IVI) and rate 53 value statements on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 "Very Dissimilar" to 6 "Very Similar." The IVI was designed to assess the organizational and managerial values that are espoused by the participants and the institutions, and the degree to which the two groups share these values.

Findings

Based on a proposed framework for Confucian ethics and values in educational leadership as described in previous sections, a survey instrument "*The Institutional Values Inventory*" was used to examine if the four Confucian ethics and values, i.e. hierarchical relationship, collectivism, humanism and self-cultivation still exert strong influences on contemporary Chinese education institutions. The four major scales of Confucian values were assessed in terms of eight subscales of value orientations that were espoused by the institutions in daily managerial practices (Institutions' Espoused Values, IEV). Participants from three different sectors (schools, higher education institutions, and education systems) were invited to give responses to the IVI. The results of the assessments gave the IEV profile for all the participants. Some of the key findings are summarized as below.

Value orientations of the group

The findings show that participants had a higher regard for collectivism, humanism, and self-cultivation than their institutions in terms of the ways an education institution should be operated. Interestingly, hierarchical relationship was the most important value espoused by educational institutions, while it is also the least favored value held by individuals. In a similar vein, collectivism which was highly valued by individuals received lowest attention from institutions. This may result from a confrontation between the existing bureaucratic and hierarchical culture and the emerging democratic culture and participation in Chinese

educational institutions, with the former favouring political and systemic interests, and the latter stressing the interests and desires of people working in and for institutions.

Values Espoused by Institutions in three sectors

As for the profiles of institutions' espoused values across schools, universities and education systems, a consistent pattern across the three sectors with institutions' particular preference for hierarchical relationship is detected. This can be explained by the cumulative and enduring nature of the Confucianism which provokes a fundamental core belief in the hierarchical ordering of personal relationships. It is interesting to note that universities and education systems espouse similar institutional values in terms of a high regard for hierarchical relations, a relatively low emphasis on collectivism and self-cultivation. Unlike their counterparts in higher education sector and education systems, school principals reported very different institutional values espoused in their schools. A consistent and much higher regard for humanism, collectivism and self-cultivation is found in schools, with hierarchical relationship considered as the least preferred institutional value.

The different cultures of the three sectors and the nature of their work may explain such differences. School principals were generally educational practitioners and site-based leaders who were practically oriented. Compared with system officials and university administrators, they tended to pay more attention to operational issues related to learning, teaching, and site-based leadership. They also seemed to have considerable autonomy in running the schools within a broadly prescribed framework. They generally operated in a less bureaucratic culture than the other two groups.

Implications

This study explored the value orientations of a group of educational leaders in China. The findings reveal that Confucian ethics and values of hierarchical relationship, collectivism, humanism and self-cultivation continue to shape educational leadership and management in the contemporary Chinese context. This study was exploratory since it was based on the survey responses from a small sample of 67 participants in a leadership programme. Further research is suggested to examine the value orientations of large samples of educational leaders in other regions of China. Many participants in this study indicated the tensions existing in their workplaces between the traditional Chinese value orientations and Western orientations in an increasingly globalised context. They also indicated their dilemmas in addressing these issues. They were subjected to the strong forces of various contexts, which mediated the influence of globalization.

The findings in this study provide implications for leadership preparation and practice in the new era. Leadership is acknowledged as a value-laden concept (Gronn, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001). Walker (2005) argues that leadership is constructed within a social milieu comprised of multiple, overlapping and constantly shifting contextual factors. These include, but are not restricted to, cultural, political, historical and economic influences. Leadership is socially constructed within each context and therefore leadership development programmes need to work with, not against the culture and context within which leaders work (Walker, Hallinger &

Qian, 2007). It is increasingly clear that leadership development programmes need to be based on a localized curriculum, both in terms of knowledge and culturally-sensitive approaches to learning and leading. It is important for programmes to note that learning "how to do a job" does not occur in a professional or organisational vacuum.

The research findings support Hallinger's (2003) recommendation that new globally-derived, research based findings as well as indigenously crafted knowledge about teaching and learning and leading schools represents legitimate subjects for learning among prospective and practising school leaders. We would argue that an awareness of indigenous cultural values in an increasingly globalised context and a contextual and cultural sensitivity will guide the immediate way forward for educational leadership development.

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Prof. Dr. Nicholas Sun-Keung Pang
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Shatin, Hong Kong
nskpang@cuhk.edu.hk

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ting Wang
University of Canberra
Australia
ting.wang@canberra.edu.au